

Book Review – Lucia Brandi – August 2013

Florencia E. Mallon (ed.)

Decolonizing Native Histories: Collaboration, Knowledge, and Language in the Americas.

Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2012. 262 pp. ISBN 978-0-8223-5152-8.

The latest publication in the series ‘Narrating Native Histories’, this inter-disciplinary collection of essays from disparate communities in the Americas is skilfully edited by Florencia Mallon into three unifying themes which epitomise Native struggle. Framed between Mallon’s inspiring and challenging introduction and pithy conclusion, each thematic section is contextualised by her conceptually rich and tightly-woven editorials, priming the reader for key recurring themes. Together, the collection and commentaries challenge the research community to scrutinise the bases of its ethical, methodological, conceptual and epistemological frameworks. The objective is not merely the de-colonisation of scholarship – task enough - but the re-orientation of scholarship towards the project of decolonisation.

Opening the collection in Part One - ‘Land, Sovereignty and Self-determination’ - are essays on ‘Hawaiian Nationhood, Self-Determination and International Law’ by J. Kehaulani Kauanui, and ‘Issues of Land and Sovereignty: The Uneasy Relationship between Chile and Rapa Nui’ by Riet Delsing. Both are remarkable for the patience and precision with which they disentangle complex colonial histories. A recurring theme is the sleights of hand, falsehoods and doublespeak – otherwise known as ‘the law’ – which has characterised historic and modern-day struggle. These intricate accounts, keeping abreast of continual change, are perhaps testimony to how both observation and scholarship are enhanced by strong affective engagement with decolonisation.

In Part Two – ‘Indigenous Writing and Experiences with Collaboration’, such engagement again surfaces in three highly informative essays. In ‘Quechua Knowledge, Orality and Writings: The Newspaper *Conosur Ñawpagman*’, Fernando Garcés V. narrates his experience of producing a Quechua-language newspaper in Bolivia. He problematizes the methodological, linguistic and political implications of inscribing orality, and at the same time explores in an accessible way how native knowledge comes to be valued. This important theme is developed in the discursive essay ‘Collaboration and Historical Writing: Challenges for the Indigenous – Academic Dialogue’. Joanne Rappaport and Abelardo Pacho Ramos jointly reflect on production of a history of

intercultural and bilingual education in Cauca, Colombia. The questions they pose concerning Native and non-Native collaboration in research and theorizing, translating theory and of community control and autonomy are answered through a unique blend of collaborative text and turn-taking monologues. The final history in this section is particularly inspiring as it effortlessly inter-weaves the de-colonisation ethic into scholarly theory and practice, activism and reflection. ‘The Taller Tzotzil of Chiapas, Mexico: A Native Language Publishing Project, 1985-2002’ by Jan and Diane L. Rus is a highly readable account of an impressive and innovatory project. With no appetite for the “inevitable animal stories and myths” of indigenous language publishing, Rus and Rus recount the process of producing community narratives of historic and modern-day political and economic survival. The ripple effect of the project would come to be felt on the regional, national and even international stage, and in the everyday lives, relationships and economies of its participants.

Part Three, ‘Generations of Indigenous Activism and Internal Debates’ reaffirms that a new generation of Native intellectuals has emerged, with the potential to mediate collaboration with the wider community – but, as in non-Native communities, only if political will and analysis are present. In the first essay, ‘Dangerous Decolonizing: Indians and Blacks and the Legacy of Jim Crow’, Brian Klopotek confronts anti-Black racism among some of his own Choctaw communities in the Southern US. His illuminating deconstruction of racial theorizing and racialised rights into the current day helps to contextualise the uncomfortable persistence of anti-Black sentiment among some Indians, even some with mixed Black heritage. He rightly describes his scholarship as both dangerous and liberating. Danger and liberation are revisited in the final essay of the collection, ‘Nationalist Contradictions: Pan-Mayanism, Representations of the Past, and the Reproduction of Inequalities in Guatemala’. Maya historian Edgar Arturo Esquit Choy brings into sharp focus the contradiction of the emergence of a Maya intellectual elite and its implication in the construction of Pan-Mayan identity and revisionist Maya narratives, in the midst of a socially riven and still bloodied post-conflict society. Perhaps Esquit and Klopotek bring into sharper focus the imperative to respect but not to fetishize ethnic identities, to remain ideologically-driven rather than ethnicity-bound, and to champion restorative social and economic justice across boundaries of ethnicity. In this sense, they offer credible and critical insights for their own communities, but also recall central tenets of decolonizing scholarship for a wider audience.